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PP RUEHIK  
DE RUEHMZ #0016/01 0221304  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 221304Z JAN 10  
FM AMCONSUL MUNICH  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5027  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC  
RUEHZG/NATO EU COLLECTIVE  
RUCNMEU/EU INTEREST COLLECTIVE  
RUCNFRG/FRG COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MUNICH 000016

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: PGOV PREL GM  
SUBJECT: BAVARIA/GERMAN POLITICS: CSU STRUGGLES TO REGAIN ITS  
FOOTING

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (SBU) A sobering opinion poll has given the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU) only 41 percent, a clear sign that the party's crisis continues, although at 41 percent the CSU was still twice as popular as any other party in Bavaria. Minister President Seehofer remains optimistic about the CSU's future. Predictions that the wounded CSU lion would turn on itself in recent party caucuses proved wrong. Fortunately, the CSU has no major elections before 2013, which gives CSU leaders a unique opportunity to regain their credibility and rebuild confidence. Many party faithful still place their hopes for the future on Defense Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, whose star power continues despite serious challenges related to Afghanistan. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Bavarian Minister President and CSU chairman Horst Seehofer told CG Tribble at Seehofer's January 15 New Year's reception that despite negative polls, which currently see the CSU at 41 percent, he remained optimistic. While the past year had been extremely difficult, especially due to the ongoing BayernLB bank disaster, the CSU was still in far better shape than any other Bavarian political party, none of which comes even close to 20 percent. After the Kreuth meetings of the Bundestag and then Landtag CSU caucuses, there were no major personnel changes, as had been rumored, and the party remained focused on strengthening its position in Bavaria. Seehofer was afraid, however, that the time-delayed effects of the economic crisis would strike Bavarians in 2010 and he emphasized that international cooperation to restore economic growth was a prerequisite for success.

¶3. (SBU) There were no real fireworks considering what was on the agendas at the two traditional New Year CSU Caucus meetings at Bad Kreuth. The 45 CSU Bundestag members met from January 6-8. Feeling like their backs are against the wall and looking for scapegoats, CSU politicians seem more inclined than ever not to fight their political opponents but rather attack their own coalition partners, mainly the FDP. The CSU was angry about the refusal of FM Westerwelle to support Erika Steinbach, a CDU Bundestag member and President of the Federation of Expellees (Germans expelled from Poland after WWII), in her bid to get a seat on the board of the Museum of the Foundation on Expulsion. Then, after Westerwelle promised Turkey that EU accession negotiations would proceed as planned, CSU Secretary General Dobrindt attacked Westerwelle's "secret diplomacy with countries such as Turkey and Poland" in no uncertain terms. Complaints about Chancellor Merkel's (CDU) alleged leadership deficiencies rounded out the agenda. The most noteworthy event was the CSU's backing away from its previous call for speedy tax relief measures, now deemed "unrealistic."

¶4. (SBU) The ten-billion Euro BayernLB disaster and the emerging four-billion Euro Hypo Alpe Adria scandal overshadowed the agenda of

the 92 CSU Landtag deputies, who followed the federal politicians in Kreuth January 12-14. Media was wrong to have predicted that Environment Minister Markus Soeder would have enough support to lead a successful putsch against Landtag caucus leader Georg Schmid, tied to the BayernLB bank scandal; he did not. In the end, the Landtag members left Kreuth in ostentatious good harmony. Their self-confidence was comfortably boosted by the surprising fact that despite the overall disheartening poll result, the same poll revealed that a majority of 51 percent of the people continued to believe that the CSU was best able to mind Bavarian interests and an even more comfortable 64 percent believed that the CSU remained the party with the greatest competence in economic matters.

¶15. (SBU) The positive aspects of the poll result were even more surprising in view of the fact that media had run a series of scathing reports concluding that Bavarian voters both in the city and in the countryside had lost faith in the home team after decades when the CSU was seen as the only party that could identify Bavarian interests and supposedly take care of them. With the BayernLB disaster compounding problems, the financial crisis has hit Bavaria even harder than other German states, and many former CSU leaders, such as Edmund Stoiber and Erwin Huber, have lost much of their reputation as visionary and progressive politicians because of the bank.

COMMENT

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¶16. (SBU) With no Landtag election until 2013, there is plenty of time for the party to engineer a rise from the ashes. Rank and file CSUers need to overcome party despondency and rebuild public confidence. In private, strategists from the CSU headquarters admit that party solidarity is fading, compounded by an ebbing trend of the once-large "people's" parties. Smaller parties like the FDP, and in Bavaria the Freie Waehler (Independents), are waxing

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stronger. The CSU lost more votes in the 2009 Bundestag elections than the CDU in other parts of Germany, and it is by far the smallest of the three coalition partners in Berlin. MP Seehofer continues to create some of his own problems, too, with rash changes of heart, populist statements, and attacks on the coalition partner that created dissension within the party. Longer term, many of the CSU rank-and-file believe that Defense Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg has the best potential to become their future leader if he wants it. For example, at a public meeting on January 18 at the Bavarian office in Berlin, Bavarian Minister of State Emilia Mueller warmly praised him and singled him out among politicians because he "calls things by their true names." We agree that his signature plain speaking, combined with his stage presence and intellect, seem to predestine him for CSU leadership if he wants it and possibly even greater prizes for himself on the national stage.

¶18. (U) Consulate General Munich coordinated this report with Embassy Berlin

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